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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5831  
INFO RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 3791  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3638  
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 3509  
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1444  
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 001087

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/04/2019

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SUBJECT: INVALIDATION OF ZAHLE ELECTIONS COULD DISADVANTAGE  
MAJORITY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Reports are circulating of the possible invalidation of the election of three members of parliament from the Zahle district. Should the Constitutional Council approve the pending petitions, the majority would lose likely lose ground and opposition-aligned former Zahle MP Elie Skaiff would return to the political forefront. The majority would, however, maintain its hold on the parliament even if the seats were overturned. End summary.

THREE SEATS AT RISK

2. (C) The Constitutional Council, charged with investigating accusations of election infractions, may terminate the mandate of three members of parliament from Zahle based on challenges submitted by members of the opposition, according to late September press reports. Pierre Fattouch, brother of Zahle MP Nicolas Fattouch, told us on September 25 that the Council might invalidate the election of MPs Oqab Sakr and Tony Bukhater, and Kataeb minister Elie Marouni. The grounds for these challenges are likely related to the exceeding campaign spending limits during the June 7 parliamentary elections, Fattouch said. (Note: Of the 19 claims disputing results of the June 7 parliamentary elections, the opposition submitted eleven complaints in the districts of Zahle, Beirut 1, and Akkar; March 14 candidates submitted five complaints in the Metn; three independent candidates filed complaints in Jezzine, Akkar, and Jbeil. End note.)

3. (SBU) The Council has several options when making its decisions, which are decided by a majority vote among the seven members. It may remove an MP from his seat and re-appoint a different candidate in his place. It can also annul the result of the disputed election and call for a new election to fill the seat. In one previous case, the Council annulled the election of the disputed seat but appointed a different candidate instead of the plaintiff.

ZAHLE UNSTEADY GROUND FOR HARIRI

4. (C) Invalidating three seats and holding new elections in Zahle may loosen the majority's hold on the city, as a result of the shifting mood of the Zahle voters in favor of long-term Zahle leader Elie Skaiff, whose unexpected loss during the June 7 election was a huge blow to Skaiff personally and the opposition in general. Several factors could benefit the opposition in a runoff election. First,

Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri and his allies have changed their rhetoric towards Hizballah and its weapons. While Hariri's Future Movement mobilized the Zahle Sunnis before the elections through sharp anti-Hizballah rhetoric, the coalition's anti-Hizballah rhetoric was dropped soon after the June 7 elections were completed. It will be difficult for the Future Movement to use the same tactic in the atmosphere of detente that is building up between Saudi Arabia and Syria.

15. (C) Hariri also alienated his Zahle followers by failing to include a Zahle representative in the cabinet proposal he submitted to President Sleiman in early September. Hariri ignored a petition signed by the seven Zahle MPs to appoint MP Nicolas Fattouch as minister, a decision that caused political discontent among the majority of Zahle Christians. The Christian opposition in Zahle is using this "Zahle neglect" argument as a tool to stress that Zahle has fallen into the hands of the "Sunni" majority.

COMMENT

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16. (C) The Council's final rulings are expected to have little impact on the overall election results since Hariri will still control 68 of 128 parliamentary seats even if the opposition wins the three seats that could be invalidated in Zahle. Nevertheless the success of the opposition in a by-election scenario would be a blow, if only symbolic, to March 14 and could restore the leadership role to the Skaff family in Zahle.  
SISON